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ABSTRACT

The Advanced Language Training Program (ALTP) of the Language Training Branch of the Public Service Commission of Canada is described. The ALTP is a structured program designed to increase employee second language proficiency. The program has an academic phase and an assignment period. The core of the four-month academic phase is a set of modules oriented to specific skills taught in workshops devoted to such topics as phonology, lexis, written expression, and oral expression. A major characteristic of the program is the encouragement of participation in extra pedagogical activities outside the structured workshops. The academic phase is intensive and is very demanding on the student. The assignment phase seeks to place the participant in a professional environment for oral and written communication for a 20-month period. It is suggested that the academic phase could be enhanced by a break in the middle to allow students to relax and assimilate the lessons. It is concluded that the program is successful in profoundly enhancing the language proficiency of the participants. (RW)

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A LINGUISTIC APPRENTICESHIP IN THE ADVANCED LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM

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Introduction

A few months ago, I lived a new and unusual training experience. I participated in the Advanced Language Training Program (A.L.T.P.) of the Language Training Branch. As a member of the first French group studying English I lived a linguistic training which was perhaps experimental since the program was at its beginning.

In this article, I would like to give a few impressions made during this period and focus on the linguistic, communicative and psychological aspects. I will also comment on the assignment phase, an area that represents an essential component of this program, and will complete with a few criticisms and suggestions.

Program Objectives

As indicated in a Public Service Commission of Canada Bulletin[1], "The A.L.T.P. is a management resource designed to help increase the number of employees highly proficient in their second official language and therefore able to work with equal effectiveness in both official languages and thus to enable departments and agencies to fulfill their mandates more effectively".

This new program requires that candidates meet the following eligibility criteria:

- have a high aptitude for learning the second official language;
- have at least level B proficiency in the target language;
- have demonstrated at least fully satisfactory performance for at least two years in the Canadian Public Service;
- have demonstrated a high motivation to become bilingual;

- have undertaken to acquire and maintain a high level of proficiency in the second language and use it at work;
- have agreed to accept work assignments where he (she) will have to work in the second language;
- be willing to remain in the Public Service for at least three years.

Thus, the A.L.T.P. represents a very demanding program for the candidates; the selection criteria stipulate that they be highly motivated and that they commit themselves to perform regularly for a few years in order to improve their effectiveness in the second language. Aware of these criteria, it was with enthusiasm that I began this training.

Linguistic Goals

Essentially, the A.L.T.P. includes an academic phase and an assignment period where the candidate makes maximum use of the second language.

At the beginning of the academic phase, in March, 1982, I had several linguistic goals. I wanted to improve my speaking skill where I was particularly weak, but I also needed to work seriously on listening comprehension, writing and reading.

In writing in particular, there was room for improvement in many areas such as basic structures, grammar, lexis, writing conventions, style, punctuation, capitalization, abbreviations and connectors. There was an urgent need to reduce as much as possible the interference of French.

This last goal was also pertinent in the oral field where my vocabulary, structures and accent were affected by my mother tongue. My oral expression had to be improved in many areas: pronunciation, accent, verb tenses, cohesiveness and delivery. I wanted to adapt my style more easily to different situations, improve my rythm and put the stress in the right place in words and sentences.

In general, I expected a great improvement in both my oral and written English, hoping that my vocabulary would be more correct and appropriate and that I would be able to use some "typical" idioms at the end of the academic phase. The speed, pace and intelligibility of my delivery had to be more acceptable and

sufficient to communicate in a professional context, at least with a minimum of efficiency. These were the main goals I had in mind at the beginning of this experience.

Linguistic Apprenticeship

For 4 months, I participated in the academic phase which was planned from the beginning of March to the end of June, 1982. This phase began with a sensitization or initiation period to the different aspects of the program: general objectives, characteristics of linguistic communication, strategies involved in acquiring proficiency, human, didactic and material resources, pedagogical approaches, audio-visual hardware, time management, self-directed learning and training plan concepts. This phase was very useful, because it introduced the students to the administrative and pedagogical components of the program and, moreover, it created a gradual transition for immersion.

One of the goals was to sensitize the students to their personal commitment, their autonomy and their priorities in the linguistic process. This commitment led gradually to the conception of an individual training plan, the purpose of which was "to related training objectives to be formed to the corporate needs of departments and agencies and to the language needs of the candidate" (1). This training plan was made in cooperation with a consultant, keeping in mind several factors such as the results of the Language Knowledge Examination, the feed-backs from the different consultants during the first weeks and the linguistic or professional goals of the students. The commitment of the students in this training plan was obviously vital, because it helped them to focus their energies on their most obvious weaknesses and most urgent priorities.

The core of the academic phase was composed of modules orientated to specific skills. Depending on his individual objectives, a student had the choice of attending any of the following workshops: phonology, lexis, written expression (memos, letters and reports) and oral expression (lectures, meetings and interviews). These workshops offered each morning during a period of 4 months were relatively structured, but left room for specific interventions and selection of themes related to the individual or collective interests. The consultants gave assignments on a daily basis, such as written or oral exercises, texts to read or to write, lectures and meetings to prepare or lists of expressions to learn.

These workshops were completed by individual or collective activities during the afternoons, depending on the student's needs. These activities ran over regularly into evenings and weekends; indeed, one of the characteristics of our participation was the commitment to invest between 70 and 80 hours a week, which included the structured and self-directed work. The students had the option, for example, of attending communication activities in the afternoon, where they could participate in discussions on pre-selected subjects; they were able to see movies thematically related to the workshops, to work with tapes or cassettes or to do any other kind of activities. Furthermore, each student had regularly to meet his personal tutor for advice, evaluation and specific assignments.

In general, I was very satisfied with the variety of activities and also the linguistic and pedagogical competence of the consultants. I had once in a while reservations on specific approaches, communicative styles or specific exercises which, I thought, were not always andragogical, but on the whole, the consultants worked very well considering the short preparation time and the many constraints they had to cope with. I took advantage of the workshops and activities offered by the consultants, even though I was aware of the experimental context where the administrative and material substructure of the program were only at a preliminary stage. In fact, several of my collegues and I were aware that we were more or less guinea pigs in this childhood phase of the A.L.T.P. and it seemed that there were considerable gaps between the theory, as presented in the Bulletin, and the daily reality in the classroom.

On the other hand, this experimental situation was very effective in fostering intensive communication between the consultants and the students who experienced the common constraints of a new program still on the process of being defined, articulated and structured. Indeed, the students were invited to give feed-backs and participate in improving the program to the limit of their capacity.

Other Activities

A major characteristic of this program is the encouragement to participate in extra-pedagogical activities, outside the structured workshops. This component of the program includes professional orientation courses in the target language such as group dynamics or budget principles, activities focusing on language performance such as diction or eloquence, self-instructional activities such as reports and reading, or any socio-cultural activities such as cinema and theatre.

I believe that such activities are essential to the enrichment of the second language. Every week, I attended different kinds of socio-cultural activities with the group or on an individual basis. I saw a number of movies and a few plays. I listened to radio, watched T.V. and read newspapers and magazines in English. In addition, I enrolled in a management course at the University of Ottawa. I intend to go on with these activities because I am convinced they provide the necessary exposure which leads to a better command of the second language and understanding of the other culture; after all, learning a language is just the first step toward the knowledge of a different culture.

The A.L.T.P. encouraged these complementary activities. However, I deplored the administrative difficulties we experienced in organizing some of them. Indeed, the timing of the academic phase was not good for those who wanted to attend the university winter courses. In addition, several professional courses offered by the Staff Development Branch were no longer available to us, because we were too late to register. Sometimes, the courses usually available in regions like Winnipeg or Halifax were not offered because of a lack of students. In the future, these disadvantages could be reduced or perhaps eliminated with planning and a closer cooperation between S.D.B. and A.L.T.[2] However, in spite of these difficulties, I appreciated the enthusiasm and availability of the consultants in joining the students for different socio-cultural activities.

One idea that could be exploited more with the future groups is to invite resource persons for one or two days in the classroom; they could give workshops or lectures relating to the student's interests. For example, these meetings could be organized every month and could be as fruitful for the consultants as for the students.

The Assignment Phase

An original element of the A.L.T.P. is the commitment of the students in finding and negotiating departments assignments where they have to "function" most of the time in their second language. It is the principle of linguistic immersion.

The objective is the controlled use of the newly acquired knowledge in a professional environment for oral and written communication. These controlled assignments last a period of twenty months.

It is too soon to assess, in detail, the efficiency of such a mechanism, but it seems to me that it is both demanding and promising. Demanding, because it constrains the student to be productive in a new organizational, linguistic and socio-cultural context which can be in his own department; promising, because it constitutes an inexhaustible source of communication situations without which it is difficult to improve the different skills in the second language. The Bideau Report[3] underlined this aspect of language programs and the necessity of a sustained re-utilization of the target language outside the classroom.

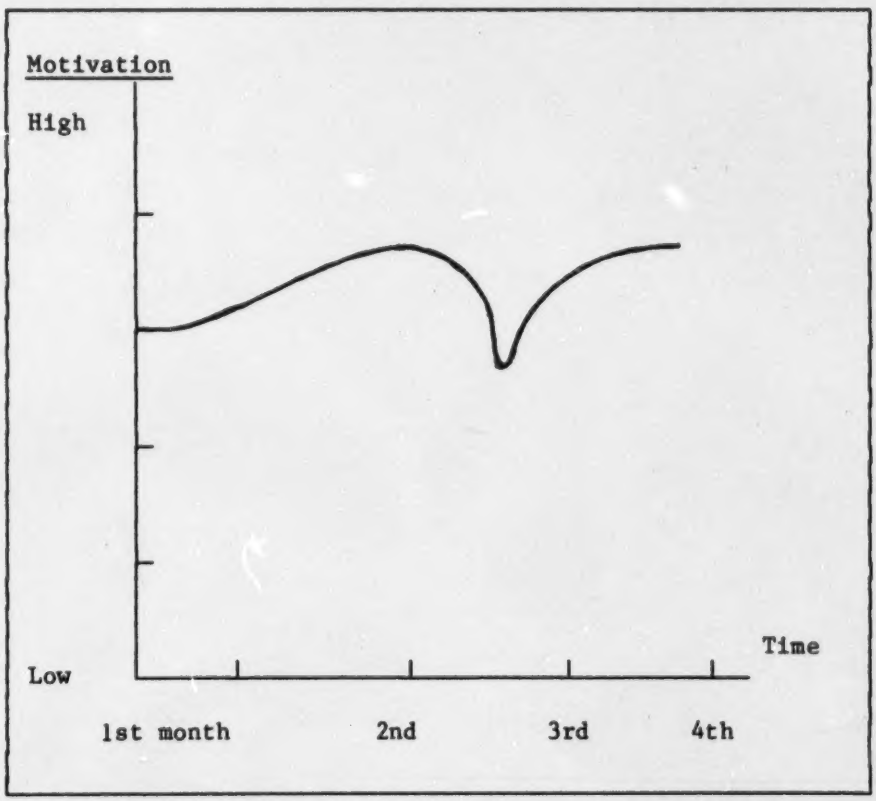
This concept, thus, is interesting. However, it will be a real challenge for the A.L.T.P. to efficiently and regularly monitor the candidates while on assignment: this is the consultants's responsibility and they will probably be overloaded when the program works at its full capacity. Whatever the case may be, the assignment will be vital. It is perhaps this phase that will determine the success or the failure of some candidates and the program itself. The reception of the host departments, the program support mechanism and the students' motivation will be deciding factors in this phase of the linguistic process.

Psychological Dimensions

When I began my language training, I was not unfamiliar with the field. In fact, 11 years ago, I was a French language teacher and I have been working since that time for the Language Training Branch, at different levels of responsibility. I have also had the opportunity to attend unstructured and different language courses (English and Spanish) over recent years. Therefore, I thought I was pretty aware and informed about several psychological aspects of adult education, particularly in the linguistic field. It was with some surprise that I discovered that my academic background in pedagogy combined with my work had prepared me only partially for this concrete and demanding training experience.

In the intensive four months academic phase, I felt literally bombarded with words, structures, rules and new concepts. The additional work at night and on weekends led me gradually to discover a different cultural communicative approach, a different humor, a different mentality. This intensive work, added to previous commitments, was very demanding. At a certain point, I was saturated and exhausted. One weekend, I decided to forget all that, to go down to Montreal and to be in close contact with my French roots! I certainly reached a plateau for a few weeks. My

motivational curb was high at the beginning of the academic phase, it stabilized, regressed at a certain moment, and began to go up again during the last third of the process. Here is a diagram of this evolution:



It was a disagreeable feeling to be in an important, delicate or intensive communicative situation without spontaneously finding the appropriate words and expressions; it was frustrating not to understand the nuances of a message, the humor or the punch line of a joke, because of linguistic weaknesses. Sometimes, I felt lost, bored, frustrated and even aggressive. I now understand more why some students get discouraged after long and intensive efforts to learn a language. However, it is a stimulating feeling when you notice the progress and when you begin to deal somewhat efficiently in situations like negotiating agreements, giving information or chairing meetings.

Taking these remarks into consideration, I think that the A.L.T.P. would be more efficient if the academic phase were divided into two parts, with a few weeks rest in the middle where the students could go back to their offices; this period would be psychologically and intellectually profitable for some students while integrating the newly acquired language.

In general, I believe that most of the consultants were aware of these psychological aspects that created some motivational problems and, perhaps, temporary regressions. I think that every language teacher, especially in a program like this one, should be extremely aware of these particular aspects of the linguistic apprenticeship and, accordingly, adjust the pedagogical techniques to the individual motivation of the student.

A.L.T.P. Pros and Cons

The A.L.T.P. began its first academic phase on a very provisional basis at the beginning of 1982. There were sixteen students, nine anglophones and seven francophones. The program was built in a relatively short time; definitions of the general concepts, development of the training strategies, organization of the administrative structures, staff selection, team building, curriculum development, student selection and everything else had to be done in a short period. French courses began only seven weeks after staff reported; English courses began six weeks later.

Several people have asked me in recent months if this language training was worthwhile and effective. The main criticisms that I can make are linked with the fact that the program was in its infancy. For example, it was obvious that the administrative structures had to be defined and consolidated at different levels. It was particularly true considering the ambiguity involving the tutor role, the evaluation of the student or the support mechanism during the assignment. The program did not have theoretical models of training plans and assignment letters. The resource centre was not very well equipped with reference books, exercises, magazines, etc; in some cases, I think that each student should have had his own personal exercise book, selected and recommended by the consultants.[4]

Furthermore, I think that student selection should be more rigorous in the future. It is important to create relatively homogeneous groups. The wide linguistic

gap among the students was a negative factor in this group: a cause of insecurity or saturation for the weak ones, a cause of frustration for the best. This group heterogeneousness was sometimes a nuisance to the individual learning and created some pedagogical difficulties for the consultants who had to reconcile very divergent needs.

Nevertheless, the academic phase was a source of linguistic enrichment which was unique. Its weaknesses were balanced by the enthusiasm of the team, especially at the beginning, the availability of the staff and the collectively high level of the pedagogical human resources.

Conclusion

I think that the A.L.T.P. is a particularly demanding program for both the staff and the students. Its human components must perform constantly at a superior level. Personally, I invested a lot of energy in reaching level C in the four skills; I am now more aware than ever of the necessity of working hard to maintain and improve this level according to the linguistic goals described at the beginning of this article.

I am sure that the A.L.T.P. will improve its effectiveness in time with a constant coordination of the numerous talents invested in this program. I am deeply convinced that such a program is useful in the perspective of diversification and specialization of the services offered by the Language Training Branch to the various departments and agencies of the Canadian Government.

NOTES

1. Bulletin number 81.22. Published on 11/16/81.

2. This problem of timing has been resolved for the coming groups.

3. The Bibeau Report. Public Service Commission of Canada. 1975.

4. This article was written in June 1982. At the time of publication a lot of these problems have found a solution.